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ABSTRACT

Communicative relations among children and adolescents are considered from the concept of reciprocity (or perspective of others) and its development. Research reveals that from the ages of two through four, and often through five also, the child's speech is primarily lacking in communicative message. It is found that the major difference in accounting for patterns of communication across ages is that the young child is egocentric. The adolescent is said to differ from the child in that reciprocity is denied through personal limitations. For the adult, like his adolescent counterpart, communication is seen as serving to enhance exclusive memperships and thus again reciprocity is denied through personal limitations. Research findings suggest that the three constituents of communication that are critical to the free exchange of ideas and the development of functional linguistic ties are reciprocity, openness, and genuineness. (DB)

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COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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The role of language in the conduct of human affairs is immeasurable. In addition to its employment in the development of symbolic referents to ideas, i.e., as a classifier and processor of information, language offers the opportunity for the initiation of forms of social communication and interaction transcending inter-species rivalry which distinguishes man from animal, and spatial and temporal dimensions which separate man from man.[1/]

Patterns of communication represent a form of learning over time. As evidenced in a comparison of communication patterns and characteristics of children and adults, there are dramatic variations in expression which go beyond age-correlated differences such as fluidity of articulation or length of vocabulary. In the young child, difficulty in relating to others is partly explained in terms of verbal immaturity. However, a full understanding of communicative relations among children and adolescents requires a consideration of the concept of reciprocity (or perspective of others) and its development.

The question of perspective, or more simply, reference to others in the acquisition of communication has been examined by several theorists, most notably Jean Piaget. According to Piaget, communication is a reflection of the maturity of thought processes and experience, as represented by the organism's integration of relations external to his own sphere of influence, i.e., his ability to relate to experiences from the perspective of others. Between the ages of two-four, (previous to operational thought) the child's associations with his world may be classified as egocentric. Furthermore, since thought and communication are intricately related, particularly at this period of emerging symbolism, the quality of the child's thought is mirrored in his employment of language forms.

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1/It is interesting to note in this context that while language provides us with the ability for systematizing and increasing the effectiveness of interpersonal communication, the diversity of language forms often serves as a major impediment to the free exchange of ideas.

Egocentrism in the thought of young children and correspondingly in communication is characterized by the personalized nonsharing of ideas and experience. The child is yoked to his perspective of the world to the extent of being unable to perceive the viewpoint of others. He believes that everyone thinks the same as he does and thinks about the same things as he. Consequently, the child neither questions his own thoughts, since he believes that they are the only thoughts possible, nor because of his failure to consider the possibility that others may have opinions different from his own, does he question oppositional thoughts.

The preoperational child does not view his thoughts as others may perceive them. Nor does it appear to him that his thoughts are necessarily exceptional and, therefore, cause for scrutiny. For the child at this stage of development, there is simply no reason (as he views the situation) or motivation to question his thinking. Even when confronted with information which contradicts previous thoughts or statements, the preoperational child simply concludes that such information is wrong, because his thoughts cannot be. From the childs cloistered perspective, contradiction does not occur. His thoughts always appear quite logical and correct.

The child's egocentrism is not a function of intent to deceive. Rather, he is unaware of his egocentrism and subsequently does not seek to resolve conflict associated with his narrowed view of the physical and social relations characteristic of his world. The child's world is unidimensional and absolute, rather than multidimensional and relative.

From the ages of two-four (and often including five-year-olds) the child's speech is primarily lacking in communicative message. He speaks in the presence of others, but without apparent interest or concern that others hear his words. (Since he perceives other people as thinking about the same things, and in similar fashion as himself, there is no need for full disclosure of details or information.) The child talks to himself when in the presence of others and does not listen to others. A group of children may engage in a series of "collective monologues." Verbal behavior involves little exchange of information.

For Piaget, the cognitively immature child is the unwitting center of his own universe. He is aware of his own point of view to the exclusion of the views of others. In communication, the child's talk is self-speak. A catalogue of illustrations in definition of the dimensions of egocentric communication patterns would include: (1) failure to differentiate pronouns or personal and demonstrative adjectives, so that the child uses "he," "she," "it," "him," and "her" without clear indication of what they refer to; (2) irrational and irrelevant intrusions of comment or unrelated topic being inserted into an ongoing conversation; (3) lack of interest or concern for apparent contradictions in one's conversation, as well as among discussants in the course of conversation; and (4) verbalization accompanied by frequent change of topic or occurring without restraint or apparent goal.

The aforementioned description of language usage among the very young suggests that if one were to attempt a comparison of the communicative posture of children versus communicative patterns characteristic of adolescents or adults he would find striking differences. Yet, this may prove not to be the case. Reference to adolescent communication among similar-aged participants may reveal comparable examples of inappropriate and uncommunicative message. Among adults similar, if not comparable, deficiency may be evident.

Language, in addition to its significance in the learning process, its potential role in cognitive development, and its communicative function has also proved of value to personal interests. In this latter capacity language has been employed as a social and socialization media, rather than a communicative media. Second, language has provided a vehicle for the personification of one's significance or importance. And finally, language has proven of value in disguise of personal involvement.

The question of how adolescent and adult communication among peers and colleagues, respectively, differs from child-oriented interactions reflects two issues: (1) how people learn to communicate and (2) an understanding of factors associated with the absence of communication, or its misapplication. The young child seeks to occupy his environment totally as a prelude to control and understanding. In this pursuit he is limited by his own perspective. His communication provides evidence of his inability to abstract information, organize his environment in other than a rudimentary fashion, and most critically, go beyond his own resources by relating to the knowledge of others. (It is not remarkable in this last context, that the young child experiences comparable difficulty in learning to listen, as he expresses in the role of speaker.)

The young child is remiss in communication as a function of cognitive immaturity. Studies of communication among children (Rosenberg and Cohen, 1966; Glucksberg and Krauss, 1967; Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, and Jarvis, 1968) indicate that the child is deficient in cognitive and role-playing skills. Specifically, the child, because of his narrow perspective is unable to identify the role attributes critical in communication. In order to play the role of speaker, for example, the initiator of communication must be able to deduce listener role attributes of his audience. He must, if he is to communicate effectively, be able to identify in others certain listener components as current state of information, interest level of the listener, information-processing capacity of the listener, etc. The preoperational child is unable to function in terms of these considerations since his perspective is limited to his own point of view.

The major difference in accounting for patterns of communication across ages is that the young child is egocentric. He fails to relate to others because of an involuntary inability to think beyond himself. For the child, there is no choice associated with the employment of accurate or invalid communication patterns.

Among adolescents and adults, however, similarly observed patterns are not a function of faulty cognition. Rather, the adolescent and adult deny integrative communication as a function of narcissism or deficits associated with social and personality development. For the adolescent and adult, the absence or misapplication of communication may represent a conscious attempt to misrepresent, overrepresent, or deny representation of self vis-á-vis others. Language serves an extra-linguistic, quasi-social function.

For the adolescent, like the child, there are comparabilities of interest in the pursuit of self-development and the learning of one's environment. However, in distinction, the adolescent, in the singular quest for personal identification through group affiliation purposefully excludes certain members of his potential listening audience (i.e., adults) in favor of other members of his immediate community (i.e., peers). Reciprocity, rather than serving an instrumental role in development, is denied through personal limitations, as opposed to cognitive immaturity.

In a comparable manner adults often engage in communicative practices similar to adolescents. Again communication is addressed to selected others to the exclusion of some members of the listening community. For the adult, like his adolescent counterpart, communication serves to enhance exclusive memberships. The jargon of the football fan, member of a fraternal order, or profession, is employed to create and enhance ties of mutual association to the exclusion of the general public. Reciprocity, employable by the adult in the development of unity of social purpose and the severance of class distinctions is denied through personal limitions.

While the child is incapable of extending himself through reciprocal channels, the adolescent and adult deny reciprocity, and as such, reduce their communicative effectiveness to a level comparable to that of young children. Moreover, the dangers implicit to purposive segregation of communication in pursuit of limited goals are particularly acute. The adolescent cannot avoid confrontation with the adult community. Nor can participants of exclusive occupational or socioeconomic status dismiss their ties to the general community.

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An extrapolation of research findings from the communication and counseling literature suggests three constituents of communication critical to the free exchange of ideas and the development of functional linguistic ties. These attributes are reciprocity, openness, and genuineness.

As suggested earlier, reciprocity refers to a cognitive sharing of another person's perspective. In addition to its cognitive referent, however, reciprocity may also be defined as the ability to relate to the affective and conduct domains characteristic of another person's emotional and behavioral competence. Specifically, reciprocity entails the capacity to "read" another person's needs, attitudes, vulnerabilities, and expectations, and to address oneself to these dimensional properties of the listener.

Openness consists of a willingness to relate to the communicative function of language expression in disregard of personal outcome. To be open means to define one's commitment to communication in terms of the content of a message even when it contradicts personal beliefs and expectations. As such, openness requires a capacity to expose one's personal vulnerabilities. Briefly, to convey information on this level requires recognition of personal limitations, and in the event of personal error, admission of fault. Finally, openness eschews secrecy, exclusiveness, and attempts toward limited correspondence.

Genuineness argues for de facto versus de jure communication. Specifically, genuineness is predicated upon the earnest desire for the expansion of information in terms of its real as opposed to its alleged message. In the case of the latter, genuineness favors a postponement of personal or product aggrandizement (as is typified through the marketing of personalities). In practice it places the speaker in the role of the listener, demanding the ability to limit personal contributions in lieu of interpersonal communicational achievements. Genuineness refers to the acceptance of, and desire to jointly share the communicative function of language.

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